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ABSTRACT

Changes in public education are well under way, with a shift from emphasis on resources and processes to an emphasis on results, from reliance on anecdote to demands for evidence, from rules for compliance to expectations for performance. There is also recognition that economic status and quality of life are tied to the level of education attained by each individual. To support the education policy work of state leaders in breaking through to high performance, the Education Commission of the States (ECS) has set its agenda for 1999 and beyond, setting forth three goals: every child in a good school, a good teacher in every classroom, and educational opportunities for every adult throughout their career and lifetime. The ECS priorities are to: (1) promote needed and positive transformation in public postsecondary education systems, with an emphasis on state policy and strategies; (2) promote the scale-up of effective K-12 education reforms; (3) initiate and support efforts to strengthen the connections between K-12 and postsecondary education; (4) promote breakthroughs to high performance in the education system, pre-K through postsecondary. Appended is a list of ECS Policy and Priorities Committee members. (RH)

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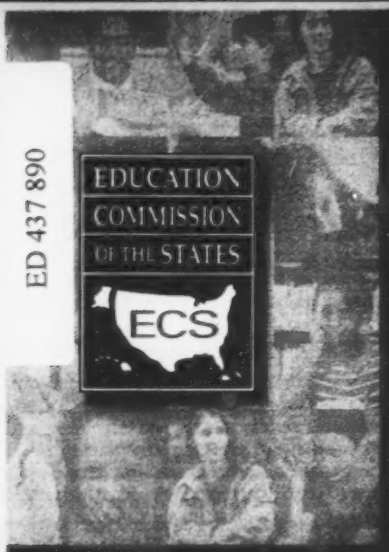

Breaking Through to High Performance: The ECS Education Agenda for 1999 and Beyond

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The mission of the Education Commission of the States is to help state leaders identify, develop and implement public policy for education that addresses current and future needs of a learning society.

Breaking Through to High Performance: The ECS Education Agenda for 1999 and Beyond

We are on the threshold of a new century — and also of a new era in American education and reform. Looking ahead, we can see the outlines of an ever more diversified system of education, with more attention to the early years of life, more options from which parents and students may choose, more variations on the "traditional" classroom, more opportunities and pathways for education, training and retraining across a lifetime.

Solidly laid are the cornerstones of the past decade's work in K-12 reform — new and higher academic standards, increasingly accompanied by assessments to ascertain progress in achieving them. As the new standards are implemented, the policy *quid pro quo* has been to provide increasing flexibility and diversity within the education system, as exemplified by decentralization efforts, the proliferation of charter schools, the adoption of comprehensive school reforms and the limited experiments with vouchers. In a number of states, education accountability systems are in place to provide information about the performance of schools, districts and state systems. The good news is that in many locations across the country, there are signs of real gains in student achievement.

Meanwhile, the winds of change are blowing — some would say harshly — on American higher education, a system long identified as one of the most respected in the world. In that sector, a plethora of new providers (for-profit, nonprofit, corporate and virtual) is invading the business of traditional institutions. And, among some policymakers concerned about higher education costs, accessibility and quality, there is a strong sentiment to "let the market take its course." For others, though, interest is rising in stronger scrutiny of the higher education enterprise and in crafting policy that more artfully aligns institutional interests with public priorities.

With the early returns on this work — the results of statewide, national and international assessments in K-12 education and the questions about markets, responsiveness and return on investment in the postsecondary sector — comes the promise of a tectonic shift in the culture and practice of American public education. Already well under way in some places — and beginning in many others — is a shift from an emphasis on resources and processes to an emphasis on results, from reliance on anecdote to demands for evidence, from rules for compliance to expectations for performance.

The implications of this shift are profound. From governance — the ways states and communities organize to provide education for their people — to public investment and financing, to modes and locations for delivery of education, to the roles of education professionals, to the traditional boundaries of time and space, many of the old rules are changing.

The Coming Transformation of Postsecondary Education

The dynamics of change in American postsecondary education are different from those in K-12 education, of course, but there is also a remarkable convergence under way, fueled in part by three factors:

The rising importance of postsecondary education, coupled with concern about its increasing costs, is contributing to a renewed and aggressive concern about quality and accountability.

First, policymakers and the public recognize that economic status and quality of life in this country (as elsewhere) are inextricably tied to the level of education attained by each individual. Just as more and more jobs require education and training beyond high school — and then retraining throughout a career, so do lifetime earnings escalate with each education landmark attained. In 1997, 40% of adult Americans participated in one or more adult education activities — up from 32% in 1991, an indication of a huge and growing need.

Second, the inescapable relationship between quality and performance in K-12 education and higher education has been a recurrent open-palm blow to the forehead of policymakers and education leaders as they review the results of student assessments, teacher tests and research into the causes and correlates of high student performance. But while the relationship is inescapable, the cross-sector connections in too many places are still faulty at best.

Finally, as noted earlier, the rising importance of postsecondary education, coupled with concern about its increasing costs, is contributing to a renewed and aggressive concern about quality and accountability. While accountability was a major policy concern in the mid- to late 1980s, there was some let-up during early years of the economic upswing of the '90s. Those days appear to be over; while policymakers and the public continue to value postsecondary education, they are demanding more evidence of return on the public's investment.

As a result of these factors, powerfully combined with the escalating competition from new providers of higher education services, performance pressures are on the rise. The talk in legislatures, governors' offices, higher education agencies — and now, spurred by external pressures, on an increasing number of campuses — is of performance indicators, performance funding, performance budgeting, performance contracting for noneducation and education services, performance pay for faculty, performance-based admission for students and performance criteria for academic credentials.

As clearly as in K-12 education, these performance-focused efforts are works in progress in the postsecondary arena. There are values to society and important outcomes for students in higher education that are not easily quantified, if at all. And yet to be perfected are performance measurement and management tools that take into sufficient account the diversity of American institutions of higher education (from community colleges to selective universities to wholly virtual enterprises), the differences in regional and community needs, and the characteristics of students served.

A central theme in policymakers' concerns about higher education is a major resurgence of interest in teacher quality. For many, this umbrella phrase encompasses preservice teacher preparation, certification, licensure, recruitment, induction, mentoring, inservice professional development, retention, salary

and working conditions, and a host of related issues. Though the importance of teacher quality in improving elementary and secondary education seems intuitively obvious, its impact has been brought home in compelling ways through recent research by William Sanders and others. These researchers document not only that teacher effectiveness is the single most important variable in determining student achievement but also that the negative impact of ineffective teaching affects young students for several years.

From Compliance to Performance: The Challenges Ahead

The transformation of entire systems of public education from compliance to performance, from opportunity defined by inputs to opportunity defined by results, is no small undertaking. Those leaders who have persevered through the challenges of the past decade will understand, perhaps more clearly than others, that some of our most difficult challenges lie in the months and years ahead.

The commitment to push forward to achieve high performance across our education systems has these likely implications:

- Beyond rhetoric, there must be a greater commitment to setting standards and then "getting out of the way" — reducing bureaucratic barriers and micromanagement from "on high."

- At the same time, a system that places emphasis on performance must find new and meaningful ways to demonstrate that it values high performance over low performance. A veritable herd of sacred cows stands in the way of meaningful incentives, rewards and sanctions that are connected to the performance of teachers, schools and campuses.

- A special aspect of this challenge involves the willingness to define teacher effectiveness at least in part in terms of student performance, while at the same time providing powerful incentives for good teachers to work in our most challenging schools.

- There will be a greater demand for and reliance upon credible, timely information, highlighting the need for investment in information management systems that communicate what people need to know, when they need to know it, in a form that is understandable and useful to them.

. . . some of our most difficult challenges lie in the months and years ahead.

- Since the availability of information does not by itself ensure that people will actually use it, a significant challenge will be in promoting changes in school and campus cultures, as well as in training teachers and leaders to make decisions driven by data. Many educators are skilled at intuitive judgment but unaccustomed to the uses of data to improve performance.

- Technology tools are now available to help people track progress and make informed decisions, but the tools are neither widely employed nor well understood. Again, this poses an investment and training challenge.

[I]n the march toward education excellence, this nation cannot afford for any child, or any adult, to be left behind.

- In the states that have led the way in establishing working systems of standards, assessment and accountability, the rising call is for more effective, targeted strategies for intervention in low-performing schools, campuses, programs and classrooms. It is not sufficient, these leaders clearly know, to administer systems of "shame and blame"; there must be strategies, assistance and resources to ensure improvement.

- Critical to a high-performance system is information on "what works" in improving student and system performance. Such information increasingly is sought and valued as policymakers and education leaders seek to make targeted investments in improving our education system. The need for focused, practical research, as well as reliable synthesis and reporting, is clear and compelling.

By no means last in a list of challenges, but certainly crucial to success, is the commitment to disaggregate performance data by racial/ethnic group, economic status, district/school, sector/campus, even by classroom. Aggregated data, we all know, mask dire and even dangerous discrepancies. If anything at all is made clear by the data on 21st Century demographics and economics, it is that in the march toward education excellence, this nation cannot afford for any child, or any adult, to be left behind.

Still the Bottom Line: Excellence for All

Entering the year 2000, the continuing reality in American education is that we have many examples of excellence and too few examples of excellence brought to scale. There is no rest in this work until we can see the following:

- Every child in a good school
- A good teacher in every classroom
- Education opportunity for every adult throughout a career and a lifetime.

A final caveat here is critical. When systems begin to rely on assessment data for evaluating performance and making investment decisions, there is the constant hazard that we will measure what is easiest to measure, thereby diverting attention and subtracting value from those functions that have made public education so vital to American democracy: the development of character, of responsible citizenship, of common ground and community. To paraphrase Peter Drucker, the most senseless thing is to do the wrong thing very well. While achieving standards in reading and math and history is clearly not a wrong thing, there are other right things that cry out for our attention. Policymakers and education leaders alike must put their collective heads and hearts to the task of preserving and strengthening those most important and lasting contributions of our schools and colleges.

The ECS Education Agenda

We stand at the threshold of a new era of education policy and practice, an era promising both extraordinary challenges and exciting opportunities.

The last 10 years of work on improving education has given policymakers, educators and the public a taste of what an education system driven by student and system performance could be. Clearly, the decisions that state leaders make in the next few years will determine whether or not the gains of the past decade can be leveraged into high performance for the entire education system.

At the same time, it is prudent to acknowledge that there is nothing easy about the tasks that lie ahead. Many of the decisions that will need to be made in the near term are likely to generate controversy and conflict. The political landscape is marked by increasing partisanship, which can lead to ideological approaches to solving difficult (and nonpartisan) problems. Term limits may result in greater pressure for fast action and a greater willingness, on both sides of the aisle, to consider more radical solutions.

In this context — as the pace of education reform accelerates, as the issues become even more complex and controversial, as the potential for ideological solutions confronts the promise of more data-driven decisionmaking — the role of the Education Commission of the States (ECS) becomes more crucial than ever before. The importance of education and the necessity of improvement are unquestioned. In addressing the challenge of scale — ensuring that every child is in a good school, that every motivated adult has the opportunity for education across a career and a lifetime — the critical role of state policy is now widely recognized. The importance of nonpartisan approaches never has been more evident. And the need for credible, timely information in developing high-performance systems is obvious. These demands connect directly to ECS' unique role and potential contributions.

To support and promote the education policy work of state leaders in *breaking through to high performance*, ECS sets forth the education agenda summarized below. The priorities reflect ECS' focus on work to promote improvement in public education and to anticipate important developments affecting the education system. They also affirm the organization's commitment to provide high-quality, useful information and assistance to state leaders. An array of ongoing ECS activities will continue to support and extend this work.

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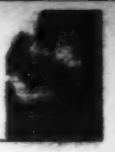
ECS Priorities

Promote needed and positive transformation in public postsecondary education systems, with emphasis on state policy and strategies.

- Under the continuing leadership of 1998-99 ECS Chairman Paul E. Patton, governor of Kentucky, pursue a major initiative focused on the transformation of postsecondary education; carefully examine needed changes in the functions, services and priorities of public postsecondary education; and consider policy options to meet new student and public needs.
- Expand the work of ECS' initiative on state policy for community colleges through a continuing series of policy briefs, policy forums, information services, technical assistance and tailored in-state workshops, all under the aegis of a new community college policy center.
- Work directly with networks of states at the forefront in advancing innovations in postsecondary education — particularly those related to access, financing, performance assessment and accountability, and uses of technology.

Promote the scale-up of effective K-12 education reform.

- Provide information and assistance to states where there is high interest in creating policy environments that support innovative, high-performance schools.
- Highlight continuing work of the ECS initiative on "Governing America's Schools," completing the report of the National Commission and working with states and communities interested in governance improvement and innovation.
- Support start-up work of the ECS Urban Coalition, bringing together state and community leaders committed to improving the performance of urban school systems.
- Raise the awareness of policymakers and corporate leaders regarding the importance of learning and development from birth to age 3; formulate an ECS initiative focused on key policy implications of this issue.
- Focus ECS K-12 policy research, analysis and development efforts on issues crucial to the success and scale-up of education reform: standards implementation issues, including assessment, accountability and effective interventions with low-performing schools; the array of policies that promote flexibility and diversity in the education system, more choices for parents and students; and resource reallocation to support improvement.
- Support the continuing development of the Compact for Learning and Citizenship, a project designed to increase K-12 students' involvement in public and community service, and to help schools make better use of volunteers.
- Identify and share promising state initiatives to address the problem of school violence.



Initiate and support efforts to strengthen the connections between K-12 and postsecondary education.

- With leadership from Wyoming Governor Jim Geringer, 1999-2000 ECS chairman, launch a major initiative to promote teacher quality through further development of a performance-based system for preparation, certification and professional development.
- Support the work of state consortia and individual states as they pursue K-16 initiatives.

Promote breakthroughs to high performance in the education system, pre-K through postsecondary.

- Expand work to identify, document and share best practices in education policy.
- Provide tools and assistance for states, in partnership with districts and campuses, to design and implement effective performance management policies.
- Strengthen ECS efforts, both independent and collaborative, to collect and share evidence regarding both the performance of restructured schools, colleges and universities, and the impact of policy on that performance. Revise and strengthen the annual ECS report on the progress of education reform.
- Continue ECS initiatives to help state leaders identify and use effective strategies to strengthen strategic communication and public engagement in education and reform.

ECS Policy and Priorities Committee

This *Education Agenda* was developed by the ECS Policy and Priorities Committee, New Hampshire Governor Jeanne Shaheen, Chairwoman.

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The Education Commission of the States is a nonprofit, nationwide interstate compact formed in 1965 to help state leaders identify, develop and implement public policy for education that addresses current and future needs of a learning society. The ECS office is located in Denver, Colorado.

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